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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this project was to stimulate interest in reading for pleasure. An experiment was conducted on a top second-year high school class, whose attitude toward recreational reading had been apathetic. The class was informed they were to read and review fiction with a Scottish setting over a five-month period, the end product of which was to be a booklet that might be a useful guide to other classes. The class was provided with a number of forms stapled together to form a booklet, in which they were asked, as soon as a book had been read, to record title, author, date of publication, setting and other such factual information; write an outline of the story; add their comments on its readability; and rate the book. Although the number of books read declined as the five-month period passed, there was a definite upsurge of interest, which, to a large extent, carried over to the third year. (CK)

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RECREATIONAL READING AND THE RELUCTANT READER

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James Clark Secondary School is a four-year school on the pattern and level of pupil ability of the old Junior Secondary.

A handful of our pupils are natural readers. Given access to the school library they have no difficulty in finding a book to their taste and present no problems. At the other end of the scale are a number who stolidly and successfully resist all attempts to interest them in recreational reading. A few in this group have not mastered the mechanics of reading, but many of the others are just not interested. They are the non-readers—at least of books, though many are devotees of comics and magazines.

In between these two extremes is the great majority—the so-called reluctant readers. This account of some partially successful attempts to break through that reluctance may be of interest to those faced with similar problems.

We have a well-stocked library, to which all classes used to repair for the customary library period. The same boys each week headed for section 796.3, "Football," and looked at the same old books. Others took out large volumes with copious pictures to glance at, totally ignoring the text. A few were on a perpetual trail for ghost stories, which when found usually disappointed because the style and language were too heavy. Others idly looked at our varied selection of fiction but could seldom find anything they thought worth reading. At the end of each library period a disappointingly small number were sufficiently interested to take home the book they had ostensibly been reading. These library periods were popular as an escape from the classroom, but for the teacher they were often a strain on the nerves and left a feeling of frustration; and the amount of administrative work involved in running the library seemed to be out of all proportion to the little benefit that was being derived from them. It was for these reasons that we decided, some eighteen months ago, to drop the school library periods and try other lines of approach.

An experiment was tried out on a top second-year class, whose attitude to recreational reading till then had been apathetic. All the Scottish novels were removed from the library shelves to the classroom and the class informed they were about to embark on a project, the reading and reviewing of fiction with a Scottish setting, the end product of which was to be a booklet that might be a useful guide to other classes.

With the help of the public library we began with about a hundred novels. Initially each pupil was given a book to read and review; thereafter there was a free choice. One difficulty that this created from the point of view of the survey was that certain books became popular while others tended to be neglected.

The class were provided with a number of forms stapled together to form a booklet, in which they were asked, as soon as a book had been read, to record title, author, date of publication, setting and other such factual information; write an outline of the story, add their comments on its readability, and rate the book, using a five-letter grading system, ranging from "A" (outstanding) to "E" (dull, unreadable). The reviewing was done willingly and conscientiously, and if the results were often disappointing, it was necessary to remind oneself of the real difficulties involved. Where a reader could not go beyond a general statement like "the characters are believable" or "the plot is exciting/dull," it was possible to draw him out orally; and the fact that the teacher had also read the book made such discussion easier and more meaningful.

At the beginning of the project most of the English periods were devoted to it, but once it had been established these were reduced to one a week over a five-month period. Throughout this time whenever a book was returned another

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was immediately offered, continuity of reading being all-important. When it was decided to pool the material that had been amassed and prepare it for publication, this task occupied all the English periods over a somewhat hectic fortnight. The finished product consisted of a list of some 50 authors—over 120 titles—and a review of 60 books.

In the five-month period of this project over 270 borrowings were made. One girl read 30 books, four of the slow readers only 6, and the average number read was just under 12. It is often said of projects that their success is not to be measured by their end-product. That is certainly true of this particular project. The primary aim was to stimulate interest in reading for pleasure, and in this by and large it succeeded. Though the number of books read inevitably declined as winter passed into spring, there was a very definite upsurge of interest, which has to a large extent remained now that the class is in its third year. Certainly the girls in it have become regular and discriminating readers, though the reading habits of the boys are erratic.

A rewarding by-product of this project arose out of an interest shown in the novels of Allan Campbell McLean. When, early on, some of his novels began to top our popularity pool, it was decided to try to find out more about the writer and his novels. A wide assortment of questions was compiled and sent to him through his publisher. He wrote to the class, offering to come and answer their many questions in person. This visit was a great success; for the whole of an afternoon the class were held spell-bound. And it led to others by Mollie Hunter and Margaret MacPherson, two other Scottish writers we had greatly admired. All three talks were taped and later typed and duplicated so that everyone could have a copy. They gave a fascinating insight into the writer's craft, did much to stimulate interest and provided talking-points for a long time after.

While this work was going on with one class, a different approach was tried with some others. Henry Treece's *The Horned Helmet* read to the bottom S1 class and Ian Serraillier's *The Silver Sword* to a middle S2, both books serialised in daily reading of twenty to thirty minutes. The response was gratifying: both classes recalled details of the stories and showed eagerness for the reading to continue.

Simultaneously with the reading of *The Silver Sword* the second-year class were given a similar theme and asked to write their own "novels." They were a difficult class, not previously noted for the quantity or quality of their literary output, but, with the usual exceptions, they became deeply involved in this project and produced pages of continuous narrative, often with illustrations. The best of these stories were typed and bound to provide reading matter and a means of stimulating interest in other classes.

At the same time a beginning was made with the formation of a class library of paperbacks, at first exclusively Puffins, which are of uniformly high quality. Later we extended the range to include the type of story known as the "literature of recognition"—books of teenage concern as are tackled in the magazines: romance, marriage, work, relationship with parents. The Macmillan "Topliner" series is aimed at providing such material for the reluctant teenage reader. The quality, on the whole, is high, and they are not obviously "written down." The Heinemann Pyramid series (hardback) we also rate highly for this age group. So, too, the new Oxford paperbacks, though some of these be ause of their greater length and complexity have a more limited appeal.

Our classroom libraries now contain between 70 and 80 paperback titles, many in duplicate or triplicate, and of a few of the most popular we have half-a-dozen copies. Apart from their comparative cheapness, paperbacks have a number of other advantages: the appeal of a colourful jacket, invaluable in the initial stages; portability—the reluctant boy reader, especially, is more ready to stick a paperback in his pocket than carry home a hardback—and the fact that paperbacks are not immediately recognisable as school textbooks, with all that often implies by way of instant aversion, is a not unimportant factor. Our paperbacks have stood up remarkably well to wear and tear: in order to keep them fresh and uncreased we have each one covered with "vistafoil," a very fine but strong adhesive covering.

To this paperback stock we have now added a number of selected hardbacks, comprising about a third of the total. Most of these are new publications, and as an aid to selection we find it useful to file away reviews mounted on index cards. Those that carry high commenda-

tions we borrow from the public library and read, before deciding whether to buy.

Here we come to the problem of money. So far as we are concerned, the question is not, Can we afford to build up a stock of books for recreational reading? but rather, How much can we spare for all the other types of school-book? The second kind — the course and general textbook, even the attractive thematic type of anthology—we can get along without, producing our own material, if need be. For children's fiction there is no substitute. And for an outlay of £20 one can buy approximately 100 paperbacks.

So far as the reluctant reader is concerned, we have found a number of advantages in this shift of reading interest from the school to the class library. For one thing, being offered a limited but varied selection, he is no longer so liable to be confused with a wide multiplicity of choice. Then again we are now more immediately aware of what he is reading and how long he is taking to get through a particular book. Unless a close and continuing personal interest in what he is reading is being kept by the teacher, the reluctant reader finds it very easy to lapse into his old ways. We find, also, that by making books available through the class library, the borrowing of a book any day, and at any time of the day, is made easier than it was. There is no reason, of course, why a book should not be borrowed from the school library at the end of the day, except that the reluctant reader has more pressing business, and, also, since he can live very easily without books, he often forgets to come. Those who are happy and eager to borrow books at the end of the day from the school library have ceased to be the reluctant readers.

We have continued the system of having pupils keep a record of their reading, and they assess the readability of each book read by means of the five-letter grading system already referred to. These ratings are recorded on charts so that we can see at a glance not only how many times a book has been borrowed but also its degree of popularity. Beverly Clery's *Fifteen,* for example, has been borrowed by 40 girls (and one boy), who rate it as follows:

S1: "A" (outstanding), 4; "B" (very good), 4; "C" (good), 1; "D" (fairly good), 2; "E" (dull, unreadable), 0.

S2: "A," 11; "B," 7; "C," 2; "D," 0; "E," 0.

S3: "A," 1; "B," 3; "C," 5; "D," 1; "E," 0.

The kind of approach we have been outlining has met with some success in winning over the reluctant reader, and there have even been a few spectacular conversions. To give examples of these is tempting but would be misleading, for there are many more who cannot be wooed, coaxed, even less, bullied into reading for pleasure. On the other hand, there are some classes in the first three years where most of the girls, though fewer of the boys, are now regular borrowers, many indeed averaging a book a week.

The crucial year, of course, is the first. If the reluctant reader is not won over at that stage, it becomes increasingly difficult to influence him as he moves up school. And if we fail to do so the reason is certainly not lack of suitable material, for alongside the interminable reprints of Blyton there is a great wealth of first-class children's fiction being produced today.

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